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Yinghua Huang

Oklahoma State University - Stillwater, yinghuh@okstate.edu

Hailin Qu

Oklahoma State University - Main Campus, h.qu@okstate.edu

Ying Zhang

Minzu University of China, muc200910@gmail.com

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HOTEL FRONTLINE EMPLOYEE'S EMOTIONAL LABOR: THE MISSING LINKAGE BETWEEN CUSTOMER-RELATED STRESS AND BURNOUT

Yinghua Huang
Oklahoma State University
Stillwater, OK, USA

Hailin Qu, Ph.D.
Oklahoma State University
Stillwater, OK, USA

And

Ying Zhang, Ph.D.
Minzu University of China
Beijing, China

Abstract

This study addressed the mediating mechanism of emotional labor in the relationship between customer-related stress and burnout in hotel industry, which has not been clearly explored in prior work. Empirical data was collected from 219 hotel frontline employees in China. The results suggest that customer-related stress are related to different emotional regulation strategies (i.e., surface acting, deep acting and genuine emotion expression), which in turn impacts employees' burnout symptoms in various ways. This study sheds new light on the controversial issue of the stress-burnout relationship.

Key Words: emotional labor, customer-related stress, burnout, hotel, frontline employee

Introduction

Workplace stress has received considerable research attention in recent decades. Research in the area has generally focused on the stress sources within the organization such as co-workers and job tasks. However, there has been growing recognition that customer misbehavior may serve as a stressful source in service encounters (Yagil, 2008; McCance et al., 2010). The purpose of this study is to examine the mediating role of emotional labor and the differential effects of customer-related stress on the three dimensions of burnout (i.e., emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and personal accomplishment). By including emotional labor as a link between customer-related stress and burnout, this study sheds new light on the controversial issue of the stress-burnout relationship, with the mediating mechanism of emotional labor investigated in detail.

Literature Review

Customer mistreatment of organizational members has become a critical stress source beyond co-worker or supervisor mistreatment (Grandey, Kern, & Frone, 2007). Interactions with difficult customers who behave in an unfair and verbally hostile manner heighten emotional labor demands for service employees (Grandey et al., 2004; Rupp & Spencer, 2006; Spencer & Rupp, 2009). Therefore, the following hypotheses were proposed:

H1: Customer-related stress *positively* relates to surface acting.

H2: Customer-related stress *negatively* relates to deep acting.

H3: Customer-related stress *negatively* relates to genuine emotion expression.

Emotional exhaustion is the state of fatigue and depletion of one's emotional resources, which is regarded as the main component of job burnout (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Because the three emotional labor strategies

represent different levels of psychological effort, we expect different relationships between emotional exhaustion and the acting modes. We predict the following hypotheses:

- H4: Surface acting *positively relates* to emotional exhaustion.
- H5: Deep acting *positively relates* to emotional exhaustion.
- H6: Genuine emotion expression *negatively relates* to emotional exhaustion.

Depersonalization is marked by cynicism, callous, and distancing oneself psychologically from customers, co-workers and/or managers (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Empirical studies examining the relationship of emotional labor and depersonalization are limited (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002). Thus, following hypotheses are proposed:

- H7: Surface acting *positively relates* to depersonalization.
- H8: Deep acting *negatively relates* to depersonalization.
- H9: Genuine emotion expression *negatively relates* to depersonalization.

Diminished personal accomplishment is a tendency to evaluate one's own work negatively, and is characterized by feelings of inefficiency, low capability, and inability to cope (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Previous research has shown that surface acting is negatively correlated with personal accomplishment (Brotheridge and Lee, 2003; Brotheridge and Grandey, 2002), while the relationship between deep acting and personal accomplishment has been somewhat debatable. Thus, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- H10: Surface acting *negatively relates* to personal accomplishment.
- H11: Deep acting *positively relates* to personal accomplishment.
- H12: Genuine emotion expression *positively relates* to personal accomplishment.

Methodology

A total of 219 hotel frontline employees in China participated in the present study. This study chose hotel service providers as a target population because the job is characterized by intensive employee-customer interaction. A convenience sampling method was employed through the hotel human resource managers in China. Measurements were adopted from previous research. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), using AMOS 17.0, was adopted to analyze the data and to validate the proposed model.

Results

The present study investigated the mediating mechanism of emotional labor for better explaining how customer-related stress influences hotel employee's burnout symptoms. A contribution of this study was that we focused on the stress source of customer mistreatment, and further illuminated the mediating role of emotional labor that accounts for the different effects of customer-related stress on three dimensions of burnout.

First, as stress of customer mistreatment increased, employees were more likely engaged in surface acting, and less likely to involve deep acting and genuine emotion expression. Second, the results revealed that surface acting had a positive influence on emotional exhaustion, while the genuine emotion expression negatively related to the emotional exhaustion. Notably, deep acting was found to not significantly influence emotional exhaustion and personal accomplishment. As expected, surface acting demonstrated a positive impact on depersonalization, whereas deep acting and genuine emotion expression showed negative impacts on depersonalization. In addition, the results indicated that genuine emotion expression was positively associated with personal accomplishment, while no significant relationships existed between personal accomplishment and surface acting or deep acting.

Selected References

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